

# The World is Broken

by quillsand

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Summary: There had been a time, a few months ago before they'd invaded the ministry, when Ron had sworn that he would do anything to protect her. Then, she had thought he was only saying it to satiate her constant state of worry- But now? Now she's terrified that he was telling the truth. (AU where Ron gets tortured instead of Hermione at Malfoy Manor.)

## 1. Malfoy Manor

\_A/N: This fic was written for stuckwithminusharry to celebrate our one year anniversary! It's been months in the process, and here, finally, is the final draft. Jessie, I hope you like it! Originally planned at around 3k, we're now over 9k. Sorry!\_

\_This is my version of how events would have occurred if it had been Ron who Bellatrix tortured at Malfoy Manor instead of Hermione. I used my copy of DH for the first part, so much of Bellatrix's dialogue, along with Dobby and The Malfoy's is copied from the original text, but everything else is mine! Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy!\_

\* \* \*

><p>"No! Keep me, you can have me!" Ron's voice echoes around the large hall, followed by a thundering slap from Bellatrix's hand. Hermione's breathing quickens. If Bellatrix took her- that was something she could deal with. If Bellatrix took Ron- well, the uncertainty alone might be enough to break her.<p>

She's more scared than she's ever been in her entire life. She can't think clearly, her brain a confusing cycle of words and names and feelings she can't make out. She hears Bellatrix's snarl of a voice somewhere to the left of her but the words are a mess.

There had been a time, a few months ago before they'd invaded the ministry, when Ron had sworn that he would do anything to protect her. Then, she had thought he was only saying it to satiate her constant state of worry- But now?

Now she's terrified that he was telling the truth.

Not Ron, she thinks to herself, eyes squeezed shut with the effort of willing it not to happen, please not Ron.

"Right." Says Bellatrix in that same slow whisper of breath, "Right." She says again, and Hermione knows she's doing it on purpose; dragging it out. This woman standing in front of her is the reason her heart pounds so wildly in her chest, and in that moment Hermione feels nothing but rage, rage spurred on by fear, in her bones.

"Cissy!" She barks, and Hermione flinches. Bellatrix catches this and grins her sadistic grin before turning to her sister, Draco's mother. "Take them down to the cellar, will you? All of them except..." Bellatrix narrows her eyes on Hermione and looks from her to Ron. She wants to scream, wants to yell and shout and cry and pound on the walls with her fists until her knuckles bleed.

But she can't.

She can't because she's tied up and she's lost control of her voice and she's terrified. Not only for herself, but for her friends too.

Hermione has been petrified exactly twice in her life. Once, when she glimpsed the basilisk from the corner of her mirror in second year, and once when Bellatrix Lestrange turns to her and says, "All except for the ginger."

She can't move she can't think she can't breathe, and then they're being hauled up and forwards and her feet are tangled with someone who she thinks might be Harry's but she can't really focus on anything because Bellatrix has Ron. Her Ron. Her knight.

She struggles to see through her tears, but that which she can make out doesn't do anything to calm her. Ron is being dragged away from her by his hair and Hermione wants nothing more than to reach out to him and pull him out of the madwoman's grasp.

Something snaps inside of her. "No! Ron! Please don't hurt him! Please!" The end of her sentence is drowned out by Bellatrix's manical laughter, and that is when Hermione realises she's lost. Because pleading with a sociopath killer is about as effective as doing no revision and expecting to ace the exam. But she has to let Ron know, she has to tell him in case-

Just in case.

Hermione opens her mouth to yell the words, but the wind gets knocked out of her as she is pushed, along with Harry and Dean and the Goblin, into the cellar below.

On the way down she feels as if all of her bones are being broken. Because surely no one can feel as weak as she already does and then

have the weight of three people crush you as you fall down a flight of stairs. For a few seconds, all thoughts of Ron leave her mind and there is nothing but the damage her body is going through. It's almost relieving in that way, the pain.

Once everything has stopped spinning, and she's stopped hurting enough to be able to process things again, she tries to sit up. There's a body- maybe Dean's- that's trapping her right shoulder uncomfortably but she's in no position to do anything about it.

And that's when it happens. At first, Hermione thinks maybe she's in hell, because only in her very very worst nightmares has she ever encountered that sound before. It's Ron. Quite clearly screaming in agony, and the sound cuts through Hermione like a razor. Her whole body quivers and shakes as she cries, each breath trapping her inside a bubble of crippling fear.

It cycles around in her head like a tornado; he's screaming he's screaming he's screaming she's hurting him she's hurting him she's hurting him- and Hermione's caught in the middle of it.

There are voices yelling, but she's not taking that much notice of them. They don't belong to Ron.

She gasps as the robes binding her seem to cut further into her body, leaving her even more incapable of breath. She starts to panic, the pain and the anticipation becoming too much. She doesn't know when Ron will scream again. She doesn't know whether he'll be able to scream again, if he even can. She doesn't even know which one is worse. There's so much she doesn't know in that moment that it feels like a cruel irony, the world ridiculing her. The girl with all the answers, yet this is a puzzle she's incapable of solving.

Someone squeezes her hand and it takes her so much by surprise that she opens her eyes to see who.

Luna's crouched in front of her, holding her hand. Her lips are moving but Ron's screams still echo in Hermione's ears and Luna's voice is lost before it reaches her ears.

Overhead, Ron screams again, and this time Hermione's voice joins his. Luna quickly tugs on the rope and the knots come undone around her ankles. There's pain, but Hermione decides that it's nothing compared to how Ron's screams make her head hurt in the worst way imaginable.

He's screaming, and when he's screaming she can't think of anything else. She won't let herself think of anything else.

It should have been her.

Harry is talking to Luna, but Hermione still hasn't moved from her spot on the floor. It's silent again and she feels like screaming just to fill it. Silence means uncertainty; silence means danger. Noise is a constant thing, it's a reassurance, and Hermione is stuck between never wanting to hear Ron scream again, yet needing to hear him to ensure he's still alive.

The thought makes her collapse again, losing what little progress she had made on standing up. Her legs feel wobbly and she's not

completely sure she hasn't broken them.

She can't think and she hates it. Her brain, her only asset, is failing her and she can't think. She doesn't know how they're going to get out of this cellar, she doesn't know how they're going to get out of the manor, and she doesn't know if Ron's okay. She doesn't know. She hates not knowing.

She stands up then, abruptly. No, she doesn't know how they're going to get out of here, but she can figure it out. She has to.

Dean follows her to the locked iron gate, where she rattles the bars in desperation. They don't budge.

"There's no way out." comes Luna's airy voice from behind her, and Hermione has never felt more enraged by anything she's ever said. "We've tried everything." And the funny thing is, for once she's making sense. Luna's making sense but Hermione refuses to believe her.

There has to be a way out. She needs there to be.

There's a sharp cry from above them and Hermione's whole body jumps as if she's been scalded. She can hear Bellatrix's voice, just barely, although the words sound all jumbled and nonsensical. There's a slap and Hermione squeezes her eyes shut as tears continue to fall, as if it can somehow block the awful images in her mind.

"TELL ME YOU FILTHY BLOOD TRAITOR!" Bellatrix howls and this time Hermione hears her loud and clear. She can't make out Ron's mumbled response but she recognises his voice and her heart flutters in her chest painfully.

And then it sinks to her feet as he screams again. And maybe it was the spark of hope that for a moment he was okay, but suddenly she finds strength again.

"RON!" his name is out of her mouth before she can finish the thought. "RON!" she screams, not knowing if he can hear, not caring if he can hear, just needing to try. His name feels like a reassurance, like if she reminds herself he's okay, he somehow will be.

The screams stop again and Hermione bites her lip to stop his name from escaping her. Somewhere in her mind she knows she's not being helpful to anyone like this, but that part of her is locked away and buried deep.

She's lost count of the tears she's shed, the screams Ron's let out.

Eternity seems to have passed in the small cellar; she doesn't know how long they have left.

There's another drawn out, tormenting silence, and Hermione decides that she needs to do something, anything, so she can feel a little less hopeless. Turning around, she can see Harry, crouched down over what appears to be a shard of glass.

She's half angered by the fact that he doesn't seem to be doing

anything; that they're all just stood around here, helpless.

Hermione can't stand it anymore, she can't stand the silence and the dreaded anticipation. She starts shaking the door furiously. Impeded by the fact that a stupid piece of wood may be the only thing between her and Ron, that it could be the reason she'll never get to see him again.

Stop it Hermione, she tells herself strictly. He's fine, he'll be fine.

She's still rattling the door, almost unconsciously now, her limbs making the decision for her. It's getting her nowhere. Her arms ache.

Hermione lets out a anguished cry, and her anger takes over. She can feel her fists hitting the door, without the recollection of telling them to in the first place. It hurts but she welcomes the pain to her system, Her nails claw down the wood because she's desperate to reach him- before it's too late.

Eventually, she stops. Her knuckles are bleeding and broken, and she's so tired she feels like she may collapse. Which she does, with a sob, her knees hitting the ground in defeat.

It's hopeless. She knew that before but now, now she knows there's nothing she can do to reach Ron. He'll die up there, alone and in pain at the hands of a madwoman, in what should've been her place. And her- what will happen to her? To all of them down here? She knows Harry's face will return to normal eventually- and when it does, it's over. Voldemort will come and kill Harry , and then go on to take over the wizarding world. If any of them have any chance left, it'll be gone soon.

Voldemort will win. They'll have failed.

Hermione sinks further against the door. She hasn't heard anything from above them for a while now- and it's this realization that scares her more than the thought of failure at their task.

There's a 'pop!' in the room, making her jump, and Hermione's head whips towards it at once. She knows it's not Ron but her heart still deflates when she sees Dobby.

Dobby?

Confused, and not totally sure this isn't just one long nightmare, Hermione picks herself up off of the floor and walks over to where Harry is squatted down speaking to the small house elf.

"-has come to rescue you!" Hermione only catches the end of Dobby's sentence but it's enough. Maybe this is it- maybe this is their way out.

"But how did you- ?"

Harry's sentence is cut short by another scream from overhead. Hermione jolts, grabbing onto Harry's shoulder to keep herself upright. He'll be fine, she tells herself, he'll be fine, we just

need to get him out, he'll be fine.

Zoned out of the conversation again, Hermione shakes herself and focuses on hearing the exchange between Harry and Dobby.

She feels as if her brain is starting to work once more as they talk in hurried, rushed whispers. Of course a house elf would be able to apparate out! That's how they get around Hogwarts when no one else can- she feels like an idiot for not thinking of it sooner, especially when there's so much at stake.

"Right. Dobby, I want you to grab Luna, Dean, and Mr Ollivander, and take them- take them to..."

Harry's eyes scour the dark cellar, as if hoping a safe location will come running out from a corner and start dancing in front of him.

Hermione's breath come quick and shallow. They're running out of time. She can feel it in every cell of her body, a response signal telling her that this is it, they need to move now or else... or else he'll die.

He'll die, and the last thing she'll have said to him will have been bitter and resentful. She should have forgiven him when she had the chance. Now... now it might be too la-

"Shell Cottage!" She yells- too loud. Her and Harry both look upwards, anxious in case anyone heard her outburst. They wait a couple of seconds, but they appear to have gone unnoticed, so she continues, "Where Ron stayed when he... When he left. Bill and Fleur's."

"Brilliant." Says Harry, nodding. "Where is it?"

Hermione freezes, the thrill at having found an answer quickly weathering away: Ron had never mentioned the location.

As Hermione struggles desperately for a solution, Harry turns to Dobby, "Can you find it?" he asks urgently.

"Dobby can try, sir."

"Great, okay." They watch as Dobby goes over to where the other three are stood, taking their hands. "It's the best chance we've got." he adds, in response to Hermione's skepticism.

Dobby turns on the spot with another quiet 'pop' and Harry and Hermione look at each other.

"He'll be fine," Harry says quietly, taking her hand that remains on his upper forearm and squeezing gently, "We'll get him out."

Hermione nods, tears welling up. He'll be fine, she replays the words in her head, we'll get him out.

There seems to be a force working against her optimism, for overhead another horrible scream is taken from Ron. Hermione whimpers, and squeezes her eyes shut again. When she opens them, Harry is clutching

his forehead in pain and a brand new fear infiltrates her system.

"Harry?" she questions, but he just shakes his head and starts towards the door.

"What was that?" Her blood seems to turn to ice as Lucius Malfoy's voice angers from above. "Did you hear that? What was that noise coming from the cellar?"

Hermione looks to Harry but his expression mirrors her own: terror. Slowly, he raises a finger to his lips and edges to the side of the door. Trembling, Hermione follows.

"Draco, no! Call Wormtail, make him go and check!"

There's a heavy silence. Not even daring to take a breath, Hermione waits, watching Harry closely for any sign of how to proceed.

"I'll tackle him. Get his wand whilst he's distracted." Harry's voice is so quiet she barely hears it, and she doesn't like what she hears. If there was time to come up with another plan, she would have done, but time is a luxury they cannot afford and Pettigrew's footsteps are getting closer.

"Stand back," Pettigrew's voice comes from the other side of the door, so close it makes Hermione shiver and her skin crawl. "Stand away from the door. I am coming in."

The few seconds between this announcement and the door opening are the worst of Hermione's life. She's so full of anxiety and trepidation she feels like she could burst.

When Pettigrew's in view, Harry barely waits half a second before he launches himself on to the small man. There's scuffling, Hermione can't see what's happening, but Harry hisses, "Now!" and she runs to help.

She fumbles in the dark, tries to find a wand, an arm, a hand-anything. But no such luck. She hears sounds; a grunt, a thud. A heavy force pushes her back and she hits the wall with a crack.

"What is it Wormtail?" Lucius Malfoy's voice again, demanding.

Hermione panics. What now? She looks around for Harry and Pettigrew and spots them a few feet away on the floor, Pettigrew with his silver hand wrapped around her best friend's throat.

For a second she's frozen, as still as a statue, unable to do anything but watch. This can't be how it ends. Ron upstairs, being subjected to the most horrible pain imaginable, and Harry down here, being strangled to death by the very man who betrayed his parents.

It can't end like this. Hermione runs up and starts hitting any part of Pettigrew she can reach with her fists, trying to grab at the hand still wrapped around Harry's throat.

It works for a moment. He's distracted and Harry almost breaks loose of the hold- almost. Soon the metal fingers are squeezing his neck harder than ever; she can see his face turn purple.

In desperation, Hermione claws at Pettigrew's face with her nails. He flinches but his grip stays strong. His wand, she thinks suddenly, if I can just get his wand...

Then a strange thing happens. Harry rasps something she can't make out, and then Pettigrew lets go. Harry staggers backwards clutching his throat and sucking deep breaths into his lungs, but Pettigrew remains, shocked.

Hermione seizes her chance and grabs the wand from his hand before he can fight back. Running to Harry's side, she tries to make contact with him. But he's not looking at her. He's staring in awestruck horror at Pettigrew's hand, enclosing itself around his own throat.

"No!" Harry yells, jumping to his would-be killer's aid.  
>Hermione watches him go but her legs don't seem to follow.<p>

Pettigrew's eyes widen and he opens his mouth wide like he's trying to scream. The image sends a chill up her spine. He'll strangle himself to death, she realises. I'll watch him die.

Some kind of reflex kicks in, adrenalin rushes through her system as she runs to help, trying to pry the metal fingers from around Pettigrew's neck. She remembers the wand she took from him, "Relashio!" She cries; but nothing happens. "Relashio! Relashio! Relashio!" she tries again in desperation, but it's too late.

Hermione stares down at the man's face, horrified. Harry tugs at her arm, "Come on, Hermione! He's gone! We have to-"

Two things happen at once: Ron gives another awful scream that seems to shake the walls of the cellar, and Lucius Malfoy bursts through the door, wand in hand.

"Wormtail? Are you down h- Aha!" he cries upon seeing Harry and Hermione. "What have we here? Two children tryi-"

"-Stupefy!" The words leave her mouth without her knowledge, the arm that holds Pettigrew's wand pointed straight out in front of her as a blue jet of light leaves it and hits Lucius Malfoy straight in the chest.

It's quiet for a second. there are two bodies on the floor- one dead, one alive- with her and Harry stood in the middle.

"Did you hear that?" This time it's Bellatrix's voice that falls down to them. Hermione's insides burn.

Exchanging glances, Harry motions to the door. Hermione nods.

They walk up the stairs slowly, snippets of conversation drifting down from above. Somewhere in her mind, she dimly realises that Harry hasn't got a wand, that this is a very stupid plan, that they're



potentially walking to their deaths.

But Ron's up there, and Hermione is getting desperate. Anything that leads her to him is worth risking everything for.

"I'm telling you Cissy, I heard something!" Bellatrix shrieks, sounding hysterical.

"Probably just Lucius showing the prisoners how to behave." Says Narcissa calmly, although her voice shakes.

"It was a girl's voice!" Bellatrix practically spits and Hermione flinches. Harry's hand finds her back, reminding her to keep moving.

They climb another step, and she can see the drawing room come into view. She sees Bellatrix looming over Griphook, dagger in hand, snarl on her face.

Hermione's heart stops.

Ron is at Bellatrix's feet, his chest rising and falling slowly, his eyes shut.

He looks so weak, curled on his side, legs tucked to his chest, barely breathing. His hair seems duller, infused with dirt and blood. Clamping a hand to her mouth to stop the sobs, she fights the overpowering urge to run and get him the hell out of here.

"I'm going to check!" Bellatrix's voice brings her crashing back to the situation at hand

Harry lets go of her back, puts both hands on the stair in front of him, ready to run. Hermione takes a deep breath before doing the same, clutching Pettigrew's wand like a lifeline.

This is it.

She hears Harry whisper, "Three. Two. One." A deep breath. "GO!"

And then she's running. "Stupefy!" She yells as Bellatrix whips around to face her, catching the older witch off-guard.

There are spells flying everywhere. Hermione can't tell what they are or who they're sent by; she just knows she has to survive.

Green light misses her by a few inches, and she throws herself to the floor to avoid another.

They're aiming to kill.

She crawls behind a dresser and fires spells from around the sides. Her heart is beating so fast that she can't hear anything for all the blood rushing in her ears.

"Stupefy!" she cries, hitting Narcissa Malfoy in the chest and sending her flying. More green light. She can't breathe.

"STOP!" Bellatrix thunders. The room falls silent.

"Come out where I can see you both. Yes, that's better. Now. Drop your wands."

Hermione crawls out from her hiding space and her world crashes right before her eyes.

Bellatrix is stood there, holding a knife to Ron's throat. He looks pale, faint almost, like a ghost. His knees are bent in what must be a painful position as Bellatrix holds him at shoulder height.

"Drop them or he dies!" Bellatrix repeats, pressing the blade into Ron's skin, where a thin line of blood appears. Hermione drops her wand as if it's burnt her and hears Harry do the same; he must have obtained one in all the fighting.

"Good." Bellatrix says, slowly, enjoying the moment, relishing their despair. "Draco, pick them up!"

She watches Draco scuttle across the floor and pick up the wands. For a minute, she almost feels a trace of pity for him, but it's gone as soon as it comes, replaced with rage.

"Now, to call the Dark Lord!" Bellatrix exclaims gleefully, using her free arm to extract her wand.

Hermione doesn't see it happen until it's too late. There's a squeak, a crack, and an almighty crash as the chandelier falls. Bellatrix lurches out of the way, and Hermione's scream joins the cacophony of noise as the chandelier lands straight on top of Ron and Griphook.

There's glass everywhere, but Hermione is numb to the shards embedded in her skin as she runs to the wreckage. She's aware of little else as she grabs Ron by the forearms and tugs with all her strength. She moves heavy pieces of broken metal from his legs and torso, doing her best to ignore all the blood.

Dragging Ron into a sitting position, she looks around the room hopelessly for something that will allow their escape. Everyone is pre-occupied, but she knows it won't be long until their focus shifts back to the two teenagers bruised, bleeding, and defenceless on the floor.

"Hermione!" Harry's voice calls out to her from across the room, "Catch this and get Ron out of here!" he yells, aiming a wand at where she's crouched.

For a second she panics. She's never been good at catching- what if she misses? But then the wand is in her hand and she turns on the spot before realising her mistake.

She doesn't know where she's going.

Shell Cottage, she thinks desperately. Shell Cottage, Shell Cottage, Shell Cottage.

It's futile but maybe, just maybe, determination, deliberation, and a vague sense of her destination will be enough.

Focusing all her willpower on Shell Cottage, of Bill and Fleur's

faces, of how badly she needs them to arrive there safely, she tries to ignore the suffocating feeling and carries on twisting.

Shell Cottage, Shell Cottage, Shell Cottage, Shell Cottage, Shell Cott-

The landing is rough and sudden. Hermione feels the wind being knocked out of her already deprived lungs; black spots dance in the corners of her vision.

Dizzy, she scans the area. They're on a beach, and Ron is perhaps a metre or two away from her, on his back in the sand. She rushes over to his side, checks his pulse, makes sure he's still breathing.

A sigh of relief escapes her lips before she sees the steady trickle of deep red running from the small slit Bellatrix had made in his throat. Choking back tears, she applies gentle pressure to the wound, careful not to obstruct his airway.

"Please be okay, please be okay. Oh Ron, please." She half mutters, half sobs into his stained shirt. "P... please Ron, you have to be okay, you h... have to."

He needs help. Real help, not just a distressed girl who doesn't really know the first thing about healing on this scale.

She has no idea where they are- if she made it to Shell Cottage or not, but there's got to be somebody around who's willing to help, right?

"HELP!" Hermione yells, although her voice cracks and breaks.  
"SOMEONE HELP!"

More tears fall down her face. She's useless. She couldn't get to him in time, she couldn't apparate them properly, and now she can't even call for help. Ron deserves so much better than her. The truth of that statement threatens to knock her out, break her completely, and her sobs increase.

"HELP US!" she screams into the wind. "PLEASE! WE NEED... WE NEED A DOCTOR OR.. OR..." her shouts transition into cries, her shoulders start to shake, and all she can think is: I've failed.

She's failed herself, she's failed her parents, she's failed Harry, and now she's failed Ron too. She's just one big failure, and all the people she loves most could be dead because of it.

"Hermione?"

She turns her head so fast that her neck cricks when she hears a man's voice calling out her name.

"Hermione, is that you?"

Bill. Hermione's heart elates within her chest; it's all she can do not to scream with joy.

"It's me!" She calls back desperately, "I'm here!"

Bill appears from over a hill in the distance, running, Fleur right

alongside him.

"You're going to be okay now," she tells Ron, stroking his hollow face with her hand, "Just hold on a little bit longer for me."

"What happened to him?" Bill says, horror-stricken as he stares at his little brother in the sand.

Hermione shakes her head. It feels wrong somehow, not being able to tell Bill what happened to his own brother, but it's not her information to divulge. "Please, he needs... He needs h... help." She sobs, cradling Ron's head in her lap.

Bill's eyes soften; he starts to nod. "I'll take him up to the cottage." he says, conjuring a stretcher and levitating Ron on top of it. Hermione almost cries out at the loss of Ron's weight- she never wants to let him go ever again.

Bill starts running back in the direction he came, stretcher alongside him. Fleur crouches down to Hermione. "He'll be okay." She says gently, and Hermione is tempted to believe her.

They walk over the hill Bill had disappeared over with Ron just a few seconds ago, Hermione unsteady on her feet, leaning into Fleur's side for support.

Every second she's away from Ron drives more fear into her mind and she struggles to remind herself that they're safe now.

Upon entering the small cottage, Fleur helps her climb the stairs to the spare bedroom, where Ron is stretched out on the bed. Hermione gasps- he looks dead.

"He's fine." Bill tells her as she rushes to Ron's side, "He's in pretty bad condition, but he'll be fine."

He's going to be okay. Hermione laughs, she cries, she can feel Fleur's hand rubbing circles on her back, hear Bill sniffing as he mixes bottles and potions for his younger brother.

Hermione takes Ron's hand. It's cold and limp in her own. Her tears fall faster as Bill's words sink in and relief hits her full on; her knees give way underneath her and she collapses onto the floor beside his bed, still grasping his hand as if it's the only real thing in the world.

## 2. Shell Cottage

"He's fine. He's in pretty bad condition but he'll be fine."

Noise. Sound. Voices.

Ron flutters into consciousness slowly, the world a haze. Everything feels blurry; his mind, his body- everything. Like he's forgotten how to think straight.

He can make out voices (or at least, he thinks they're voices, he's not completely sure.) Words that seem to drift from each other as soon as they're said, sentences stringing apart, their meaning

lost.

Nothing makes sense. Where is he? How did he get there? What the hell happened to him?

His head. Oh god, his head. He can still hear the voices, vaguely-faint buzzes of echoes of people.

Water. Water would help him.

Gathering all his strength, he makes a noise somewhere between a groan and a whimper, his throat feeling as if it's being torn out of his body as he does so.

There's more noise, more movement. Something cold and damp is placed on his forehead, the person behind the gesture brushing his hair from his face in an almost tender way.

"Don't move, okay?" says a voice, soft and vulnerable. Catching the words as soon as they come, Ron begins to nod, but his head disagrees with the action, making him squeeze his eyes tight against the blinding pain.

"I said don't move!" The owner of the voice carefully repositions his head, presses the damp washcloth against his forehead again. "Just lay still." It whispers, calm and reassuring. "Fleur's gone to find something for the pain, she'll only be a few minutes."

This time Ron doesn't nod, but he does use all the remaining strength of his muscles to grip the hand he has found to be in his.

"Hermione?" his voice is a croaky, fragile thing, and it makes him wince to speak, but he has to hear her, has to know she's there.

"It's me." She squeezes his hand back. Gently. "You're okay now, we're all okay now. Try not to speak." There's emotion in her voice; Ron thinks she may have been crying. He wants to reach out to her, to comfort her, to hold her in his arms and tell her that it's all okay now, that he's okay and that she's okay and that everything is going to be okay.

Except that it's not and Ron is delusional if he thinks he can convince either of them otherwise. His body still sort of feels like it's on fire, and his limbs are so weak that he doubts they'd be able to support paper.

So instead he tries to focus on their intertwined hands, her thumb stroking the back of his palm; or her fingers threading themselves through his hair, down his face, resting against his cheek.

This isn't so bad, he begins thinking, maybe we can just stay like this-

A loud noise. Pain. Ron winces, and Hermione's grip on his hand tightens. "Shhh, it's okay, it's just Fleur, it's okay."

He feels another hand take his, colder than Hermione's, and together they help ease him into a sitting position. His head feels like it's

going to burst, but Hermione whispers soft reassurances to him, and soon it dies back down to a dull ache. He can almost use her voice to drown out the hurt from behind his eyes.

Something cold is pressed to his lips. "Drink. You will feel better." Fleur's voice, somehow both gentle yet demanding at once. Ron allows the thin liquid to be poured into his mouth, and doing his best not to gag on the rancid taste, he swallows.

"Good." Fleur says then, "You should try and open your eyes soon, let zem adjust." She shares a quick, whispered conversation with Hermione and then Ron hears the door open and close; she's gone.

Hermione's hand is rubbing his back, between his shoulder blades, and her other is clasped within his. She doesn't say anything. Ron doesn't really expect her to.

Now that his head feels clearer and he can think properly, Ron finds himself even more confused than he was in the first place.

He opens his eyes.

At first, he has to squeeze them shut again, the light sending more shoots of pain directly through his skull. Hermione's presence is gone from beside him, but it returns just as he's about to call out. "I dimmed the lights." she says, quietly. "I thought it might help."

Ron swallows the emotion he feels at the tenderness in her voice and opens his eyes again.

She's there; safe and sound and alive, amber in the orange glow of the light. His heart does a dance of relief in his chest and even his head slows down enough to appreciate the fact that she's sat in front of him, breathing.

For a while they stay like that, trapped in the other's gaze, but then Hermione moves. Slowly, as if asking for confirmation, she goes to hug him. Ron raises his arms as high as he can stand and wraps them around her small torso, burying his face in the matted curls at the base of her neck.

Breathing in her scent, resting his fingertips on the small of her back as if seeking for confirmation that she's real, Ron closes his eyes and lets the moment wash over him like a tidal wave. In return, Hermione clutches him like she's afraid he'll fall through her fingers at any second; he can hear her quiet sobs into his hair, feel her soft lips pressed to his forehead, and he thinks: This isn't fair.

It isn't fair how close they came to losing each other. It isn't fair that he was only a few minutes away from never seeing her smile again, never hearing her laugh again, never holding her hand in his again.

It isn't fair how broken they've all become since the start of this fucking war, and it makes him angry to think about because she doesn't deserve this, none of them deserve this. They're just kids, for fuck's sake. What do they know about fighting a war that shouldn't be theirs to fight?

At the start of the war, Ron had vowed to himself that he would do his best to keep her safe. And he had, in a way. When he'd called out back at the Manor, it hadn't been a conscious decision. He wasn't aware of ever having made it, it was just a reflex, a reaction-something necessary to keep her safe.

He can't remember ever being as terrified as he'd been when the words left his lips, but he knew as soon as he'd said it that it was the truth; that nothing could ever make him take it back.

Sometimes it scares him, how much he loves her.

Hermione's sobs turn to sniffles above him and she lifts herself out of his arms like she's tearing herself away from a dream. He lets his arms fall to his side as she takes his hand again, giving it a gentle squeeze. "It doesn't hurt too badly, does it?" she asks, concern dripping from her every pore.

"Nah, it's manageable now." He tries to smile, but his throat burns when he speaks; he feels like he's recently swallowed fire.

Hermione catches this, for her brow furrows and she scours the bedside table for her wand. "Fleur says you can have some more pain potion in a while, but water will have to do for now, okay?"

Ron hums his agreement, not trusting his voice when the promise of water is so close. Hermione casts the spell non-verbally and brings the glass of water to his lips; his hands shake too much to hold it still. He sips gratefully, the water acting like magic as it runs down his throat.

"Thanks," he says, voice stronger although still hoarse, as Hermione places the now empty glass back on the bedside table.

She smiles at him, a strained smile that makes his insides itch. "You're sure you're okay?" She asks, "You don't need anything else?"

Ron shakes his head, the movement feeling a lot more welcome than it had done just moments prior. "It's okay, 'm good."

"Right then." Hermione says and starts fiddling with the frayed hem of her sleeve. "That's good."

She looks scarily close to crying again, so Ron tries to change the subject, "Hermione, uh, where exactly are we? And uh, how did we... get here?" He finds that the more he uses his voice, the easier it becomes.

She doesn't reply, staring intently at the floor below.

"Hermione?" he speaks quietly into the thick air that surrounds them. "Are you okay?"

Her head snaps up to look at him and she nods with vigour, an act that is betrayed by the tears falling from her eyes. "I just..." Her voice is quiet, Ron has to strain to hear her, "I thought I was going to lose you back there." She says, and then the tears come faster, spilling down her cheeks like raindrops down a windowpane.

Ron doesn't know what to do, what to say. He feels like he's been stepping around Hermione for so long that any form of physical intimacy feels out of place, and this, well- this may just be the most vulnerable they've been to each other in a while. "I'm okay," he says, trying to cheer her, "It'll take more than that to do me in, don't worry." She doesn't laugh at his weak attempt at humour and the smile drops from his face like a rock.

"I could hear you screaming. I could hear everything and I've never been so scared in my entire life. You could've died!" Hermione wraps her arms around herself; the action reminds Ron of how small animals curl into themselves to hide, and he wonders if that's what Hermione's doing: hiding.

"It's over now." He points out gently, wanting to tell her what she needs to hear. "It's over and we're fine. I'm fine."

Hermione looks at him skeptically through her tears. "I don't want to fight anymore." she says softly, and it's such a blunt statement, so real and honest that he feels a shiver up his spine. "I wouldn't be able to bear it if I lost you."

Ron gulps down the heavy feeling that's settled itself in his throat and takes her other hand in his. "You're not going to lose me. You're not going to lose anyone, okay? We'll all be fine. I promise."

Hermione turns away from him, "You can't promise something like that."

"Then I'll do my best to make sure it doesn't happen." he vows.

"No!" Hermione raises her voice and Ron startles. "No. I don't want you putting yourself in danger for me anymore. Please."

Ron stares. He watches the way her lip trembles as she fights to regain her composure, the way she closes her eyes to stop anymore tears from escaping, the way she still manages to look beautiful despite all the flyaway hairs and dirt on her face.

"Okay." he says, fully aware he's making a promise he can't keep; has no intentions of keeping. "I won't."

Hermione nods once, satisfied with his response, and then her expression changes. Softens. "You should lie down." she says, holding the back of her hand to his forehead. "Get some rest."

Whilst Ron can't deny that he feels tired, he also doesn't feel right resting when so much occurred in the past few hours. The throbbing in his head is gradually building back up, like the echoes of a hangover, and really, sleep would be a great bliss.

Hermione fluffs the pillow supporting his head and lets him use her shoulder for support as he lowers himself down onto the bed. Smiling weakly at him, she runs her fingers through his hair, smoothing out the long bit of fringe at the front and down the sides of his face. Her touch feels nice, comforting; it feels like home in a way that home hasn't felt for years.



"Just try and get some rest, okay?" she whispers, "Fleur said it will do you some good to sleep for a little while."

Ron murmurs in agreement, his hand still entwined within hers, reveling in the simple comfort of her presence.

It's enough. Right now, sleep seems like the only viable option. His bones ache, he feels weak, and his head feels foggy. He's already tired just from having talked to Hermione for a while, and now- now he almost can't wait to drift into slumber.

There's still things that don't make sense, still things he's confused about; but it can wait.

He focuses on Hermione, and soon he is lost to his unconscious.

\* \* \*

><p>The next few days pass by in a blur. He spends most of his time sleeping or in bed. It's getting rather tiresome, but Fleur insists that his body needs time to heal (a fact that he can't really argue because without the liberal doses of potions he seems to take a dozen times a day, Ron's not sure he would be able to think clearly, let alone get out of bed.)<p>

Hermione stays with him most days. Sometimes they make small talk (although is it really small talk if it feels like the largest thing in the room? Ron's not sure.) Sometimes Hermione will talk and he'll just listen, drawing strength from her voice, and sometimes they don't talk at all. They definitely don't talk about the Manor. Ron has tried to bring it up a couple of times (he still hasn't got the full story about what happened- just fragments that he's tried to fit together like some twisted jigsaw puzzle) but Hermione becomes distant whenever he does, so he's stopped trying.

There are times when he's in too much pain to really think clearly- when noise bounces around and shakes his skull, when the light infiltrates his eyes and makes him dizzy. Those times, Hermione will hold his hand and help him bear through it. It's not exactly ideal but he figures that as long as she's there, he'll be okay.

Harry has come up to sit with him a handful of times. He doesn't come often, and when he does, he doesn't stay for long- but Ron understands. He feels an ache somewhere in his chest whenever he thinks about what Harry must be going through.

The first time Harry ventured into the small room where Ron rests, it had been early in the morning sometime after Dobby's funeral. Ron was awake (his sleeping schedule is pretty fucked up- courtesy of Bellatrix and all the potions he now takes,) and whilst Harry had never actually said the word 'sorry' it was clearly written all over his face.

Ron had wanted to say it then. Tell him how it wasn't his fault, stop him from blaming and beating himself up about it, but the words had gotten stuck in his throat. Harry had took Ron's hand in his own without saying a word and Ron just knew it wasn't the time for talking. They could talk later, he decided, fully aware that later was an indeterminate date that would most likely not occur.

Dobby's death had taken a lot out of Harry (well, all of them really.) Ron remembers the elf's funeral as one of the only times he's been out of this bed since they arrived at Shell Cottage almost four days ago. Fleur had assisted him in walking down to where Harry had laid Dobby's grave, a well flowered area to the rear of the modest garden. He had sat down next to Hermione and leant against her shoulder for support, he remembers they exchanged some words, although what the words were he has no clue. Luna had then said a piece about Dobby, followed by Harry. When it got to his turn, he simply took off his shoes and laid them on the elf's grave. Dobby always liked clothes.

Hermione was shaken, and Ron was forced to remember S.P.E.W; maybe it hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

Harry had seemed vacant after that. Always with a faraway expression, like he was looking at things none of the others could see.

Ron hates seeing them like this and knowing there's nothing he can do to help. Whenever he's around Hermione, she's too busy nurturing him to worry about herself, and Ron can't seem to reach through to her. Harry's the same, although Ron has seen very little of Harry recently.

He's worried for them.

\* \* \*

><p>Nightmares haven't had the chance to come yet. Ron thinks they would have done- if he wasn't intentionally drinking the bottles of dreamless sleep potion that Fleur hands him before he drifts off.<p>

"I'm sorry, Ron, but you've already used it three nights in a row, any more would be very bad for your 'ealth." She'd said in a soft tone, like she was scared he'd break. (He's really starting to get sick of that- people treating him like he's fragile, but what can he do about it? Nothing.)

"That's fine," Ron had replied, attempting a smile that tried to convey what he was feeling. An 'I'm fine, don't worry about me.' sort of smile. He's not sure it worked because Fleur had simply given him a pitying look before ruffling his hair gently and leaving the room.

\* \* \*

><p>The fire is back; he's in pain again. It courses through his body like flames, and when the scream escapes, it vanishes.<p>

Ron bolts upright, breathing heavily.

Just a dream.

He searches around the room for some sort of clarity. He's shaking, and his heart is pounding and he feels like he can't breathe.

"Ron?" Hermione's voice, just out of reach. He tries to find her, but between the foggy state of his mind and the dim light, she is nowhere

to be seen.

"Ron, it's okay, you're just dreaming." Her voice wobbles. Ron concentrates on the figures in front of him, tries to find their outlines, convinced one of them must belong to her.

"Hermione?" he calls into the silence.

There's a hand on his shoulder. Ron almost throws it off before recognition sets in. "I'm right here, Ron."

Someone turns the light on and the world comes into view again.

Hermione is kneeling beside his bed, bushy hair all over the place, concern etched deep into her features. Behind her stands Harry, Bill, Dean, Luna, and Fleur.

Hermione turns around to exchange words with them. Ron grabs her hand, trying to silently communicate what he doesn't have the strength to say: \*Stay with me. Please.\*

The others leave, and Ron is scared Hermione will stand up and join them- but she doesn't. Sitting herself on the side of his bed, she squeezes his hand, running her fingers over his wrist.

"You're okay?" she asks, quiet and concerned.

"Mm, just a bad dream."

"Do you... Would it help to talk about it?"

"I... Er... No. I'm fine, honestly." He tries to smile at her but she raises an eyebrow sadly, "Maybe tomorrow, okay? I promise I'm fine."

Hermione nods, but it isn't hard to see she doesn't believe him. "Do you want to try sleeping again?" she asks instead.

"No!" He exclaims before thinking it through. "I mean... not... not yet."

Truth is, he just doesn't want Hermione to leave. It's something he can't explain but when she's here, he feels safer.

He squeezes her hand again, willing her to understand that he just can't do this alone; not now.

She squeezes back, and a heavy silence settles.

"You should've let her take me instead." her voice comes out of the stillness, small and afraid, but it send jolts up Ron's spine just as much as if she'd yelled.

"What? Hermione I could neve-"

"I'm serious, Ron. I've treated you like nothing but a piece of dirt these past few months and then you offer yourself up in my place? I don't deserve that."

"Hey hey, wait a second. You had every right to treat me like the arse I was those months. I left you, for fuck's sake! I deserved to be treated badly! If anything, I owed it to you."

Hermione is quiet. Then, "That's why you did it then? Because you felt like you owed me?"

"What? No! I said that because it was true, because I care about you, and because if anything happened to you I'd never forgive myself!"

"Oh, Ron." Hermione speaks, quietly so, and even in the dark he hears the telltale signs that indicate tears.

"It's okay. Hermione, it's okay now."

"It's not!" She cries, "It's not okay! You can't just put your life on the line for me and then say it's okay because it's not!"

"Hermione, I don't understa-"

"You think I don't care about you either? You think I could forgive myself if anything worse had happened to you?" Here, she pauses and takes a deep breath before continuing, softer, "You think I'd be fine without you?"

For once, speech doesn't come easily to him. He'd known that she cared about him, obviously, but the rest? Truthfully, Ron had thought he'd fucked up with Hermione when he left. He knew there was probably no redemption from that night, and he thought Hermione would've taken the same view... but now...

When he left, it seemed like an ending of everything that they were, everything they could've been.

Maybe it's not over yet.

"No, I... I just... Fuck Hermione, I don't know what I thought. I mean, I wasn't really thinking about it anyway, was I?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not like I sat there and thought 'I should yell out and sacrifice myself for the girl I love' or anything, I told you, it was just something that happened! I didn't think about it before I did it, I just... did!"

Hermione had gone quiet.

"What?" Ron asked, bemused. "What's wrong?"

"What you just said..." she trailed off

"What about it? I swear it's true, honest."

"No, no, before that..."

"What?"

"You said... you said 'the girl I love'."

"Oh." He waits then, "I did?"

Hermione nods.

"Oh." He says again. Way to go Weasley, he berates himself, if it wasn't fucked up before then it definitely is now. "Shit. Uh, I didn't mean... Well, I did, but it's not... I don't expect... Uh..."

"It's okay." Hermione's voice interrupts his rambling, "It's okay, I... I know."

Ron's head snaps back up from where he was staring at the floor, "Yeah?"

"Yeah." She smiles at him, but it's not like the pitying smiles he's gotten so used to from her these last few days; it's soft and caring and it makes him feel like there's so much more to life than whatever moment they're living in right now.

For the first time in a long time, he feels okay.

"Right. Well, er, that's... That's good then." He says, more to fill the silence than anything else. She knows? But then... does that mean..?

Ron's brain is off at 200 miles per hour, so he misses it when Hermione speaks. "Huh?"

"I \*said\*, you should probably try and get back to sleep now."

His first reaction is to protest, to rebel against the tone her voice has taken on, how the intimacy of just a few seconds ago has disappeared without a trace.

But merlin, is he tired.

"Yeah, probably best."

"Would it..." Hermione begins, but trails off; he can see the doubt written all over her features, even in the dark. "Would it help if I stayed?"

It would. He's so certain of the fact that he wants to scream it out, hold on and never let go.

"I guess, yeah. But you don't have to. I don't want you to stay up because of me."

Hermione gives him that same smile again, "I won't, don't worry. I'll sleep in here for tonight."

Ron blinks. "Okay but... there isn't a bed." He thinks she may be sleep deprived. Either that, or she thinks he's going to let her sleep on the floor.

"Well, there's your bed? I mean, if it's okay with you, of course. If not I'll just..."

But he never found out what she would have done because he shuffled to the other side of the bed so quickly he almost fell off the edge. "Thanks," says Hermione, almost a whisper as she cautiously climbs in next to him.

It's hard to tell with the lights off, but he's almost certain that she's blushing. (He knows he is, he can practically feel the heat radiating off of his ears.)

Their bodies aren't touching, but Ron feels as if electric is running through his veins anyway. It's strangely intimate, sharing a bed. He turns to his side and watches as she does the same until they're facing each other.

"Thanks." he says, a whisper.

"For what?" Hermione asks, her eyes alight with... something he doesn't recognise. Concern? Care?

Love?

"For, y'know... staying... with me."

"Oh," she says softly, smiling tenderly at him, "Yeah. No problem." Hermione reaches her hand out to him, and he claps it within his own, bringing them to rest inbetween their bodies. Her face is the last thing he sees before he closes his eyes and drifts into sleep.

### 3. End

Hermione watches Ron's eyes close, his breathing slowly even out and fall into a steady rhythm. She smiles.

They're okay. They made it.

Ron loves her.

Leaning forwards, Hermione presses her lips to his forehead softly, lingering perhaps a second longer than is wise.

"I love you, too." she tells his sleeping form. "So much."

\* \* \*

><p><em>AN: Thanks you so much for reading! This is by far the longest one-shot I've ever written (I know it's in three parts but I wrote it as a whole and then split it up so it still counts okay) and I'm actually pretty proud of it ^-^ Comments/reviews much appreciated- I'd love to know what you thought! And finally, a big thanks to stuckwith-harry aka jessie on tumblr who has made my life a million times better just by being a part of it 3 ily dork\_

End  
file.